

China and the World History of “Revolutions”: Viewing from the Angle of Sex and Science

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The appearance of such recent works as Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* (2000) and Benjamin Elman’s *On Their Own Terms* (2005) reveals the persistent preoccupation among scholars from various disciplines with the historiographical significance of “Revolutions.” This is especially highlighted by their dissatisfaction with Eurocentric explanations of the status of China in the history of the world. However, whether these revisionist studies took the question of the Industrial or the Scientific Revolution as their analytic point of departure, the realms of desire, passion, love, and sexuality were rarely conceived as important sites of historiographic intervention, contestation, and possibility for the refiguring of the grand narrative of the global past. Informed by recent developments in translation studies, especially those theoretical frameworks on the economy of translation in global circulations, this panel intervenes on both the historical and the historiographical level, offering two different “micro” and “macro” recontextualizations of the idea of “revolution” by viewing from the angle of sex and science. Was there a “Sexual Revolution” in the modern world? In what ways did the historical positioning and functionality of China take a particular significance in this potentially dynamic process of global reconfiguration? How do questions of precedence and transformations, continuity and ruptures, ontology and imitations, knowledge and power, figure into the temporality and spatiality of the world’s erotic past via such particular notions of “Westernization” and “modernization” that gained meaningful epistemological grounding only in the last two centuries or so? Whether focusing on Shanghai in the 1920s or exploring the century-long consolidation of a modern *episteme* of sexuality, this panel revisits the role of China in the world history of “Revolutions” by staking new grounds for the re-orienting of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*.

Paper 1: Sex and Revolution in 1920s Urban China

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Paper 2: The Historical Epistemology of a Great Convergence: China, Europe, and the Conceptual Foundations of a Worldwide “Sexual Revolution,” 1850-1950

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Sex and Revolution in 1920s Urban China

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Shanghai, "Roaring Twenties". A city often labeled the "Paris of the Orient" and "Whore of the East", sex was everywhere to be found. Love was for sale in the streets, with prostitutes of different ages and ethnicities catering to a vast clientele. In the pharmacies on Fuzhou Road, the "Cultural Street" of Shanghai, one could purchase drugs including 606 and 914, as well as sexual tonics and aphrodisiacs allegedly based on new French formulae. At the book stands, traditional Chinese pornographic novels were on offer, alongside pictorials containing nude photographs. Tabloid sheets provide all the details on the latest sex scandals, as well as "field reports" on brand new brothels. Around the corner, the Baixin cinema is showing "The Story of Erotic Dancers in Paris, a 1927 film starring the cabaret dancer "Black Venus" Joséphine Baker. Inside a club, bands performed jazz with ribald Chinese lyrics. In parks and playgrounds, the young generation of Chinese experimented with dating and holding hands, skills "imported" into China, for the very first time. Meanwhile, lovers perfected the modern, fashionable art of French kissing and frottage in a cafe, a smoky bar or a dimly-lit dance hall. A "Modern Girl", smoking a cigarette, click-clacking elegantly in her high-heels, donned in a light silk dress that barely concealed her curves, made heads turn wherever she went.

As urban China was hit by this "wave of sex" in the 1920s, one also witnessed what Michel Foucault would call a "veritable discursive explosion" -- an intensification of the production of knowledge on sexuality, a recognition of the need to regulate the sexual field. Sex was equated to human nature, and a revolution in sex was seen by intellectuals as a panacea to China's problems. Many entrepreneurial intellectuals in Shanghai participated the "Business of Enlightenment": they opened their own bookshops, sold their own journals, books and translated works on sex education. They argued against each other on issues such as marriage, birth control and masturbation. Some of them dreamed up utopias where sex would be rationally micro-managed. "Dr Sex" Zhang Jingsheng, the subject of my doctoral thesis, collected "sex histories" in 1926, an "incitement to speak" and a "discovery of the masses" that were part of the newly established enterprise of the human sciences in China. My paper would discuss this story of how sex became this central problematic in the intellectuals' quest for modernity and their project of nation-building.

The Historical Epistemology of a Great Convergence:
China, Europe, and the Conceptual Foundations of a Worldwide “Sexual Revolution,” 1850-
1950

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The central problem that concerns my comparative and global analysis is the following: what are the conditions under which certain types of statements about sexuality come to be comprehensible? To take the insight of historicism seriously, not every statement is comprehensible at all times, either on the individual level or the macro-level of social and historical epochs. Specifically, in this paper I will focus on one particular form of this problem of comprehensibility, namely under what conditions could one comprehend a corpus of statements, those statements that help to constitute the domain of sexuality, as being either true or false? Not all statements claim the status of being true or false, but those that claim a scientific status do claim to be within the realm of truth-and-falsehood. Since I am dealing with how the productive condition of scientific knowledge changes over time, my project is at once both epistemological and historical. Adopting Arnold Davidson’s notion of “historical epistemology,” which resembles Michel Foucault’s idea of “epistemological history,” the particular guiding problem of my study, then, is this: under what conditions did various statements of sexuality come to claim the status of being scientifically comprehensible—essentially, the status of being possible candidates of truth-and-falsehood? Moreover, how did these conditions vary across geopolitical entities in conjunction with the contours of temporality?

After establishing the conditions for the emergence of sexuality in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century, I will turn to the parallel conditions in China during the first half of the twentieth century. Although the grand narrative over the course of one hundred years that I offer is the “proliferation” of what Foucault has called Western *scientia sexualis* to East Asia, I will also propose and develop the more specific notion of “epistemic modernity” to capture the dual nature of knowledge making that distinguished the East Asian from the Western context: namely, knowledge claims about sexuality *were themselves* explicit claims about referential points of authenticity, traditionality, and modernity (e.g., such systems of knowledge as Chinese versus Western medicine). For instance, whereas the shift from a criminal to a medical status underpinned the emergence of homosexuality as a conceptual category in Europe, the transformation from a culturalistic to a nationalistic worldview characterized the appropriation of homosexuality as an organizing concept for same-sex relations in China. Meanwhile, emerging powerful nation-states such as the United States and Japan, with their implicit or explicit imperialist aims, served as important conduits in this dynamic process of transcultural globalization.

In this paper, I argue that this century-long process denotes a “Great Convergence” in the history of the modern world, whereby a “Sexual Revolution” that spanned across the globe over the course of roughly a hundred years established the preconditions for our conceptualization of sexuality since the mid-twentieth century. One of the most decisive consequences of this revolution is the appearance of increasingly visible movements, organizations, communities, and

urban cultures structured around sexual identity categories throughout the world during the last sixty years or so. The new *episteme* of sexuality consolidated by this “Sexual Revolution” has also enabled the framing of sexual rights to be figured into a larger international discourse of human rights by the turn of the twenty-first century. Finally, I will offer concluding insights regarding the potential advantages with interpreting historical “revolutions” as global convergences, rather than indications of divergence or civilizational difference (as is often the case with the Scientific or Industrial Revolution), in our continuing effort to comprehend our shared past and present.